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PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHDIR #0017/01 0871508
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM IRAN RPO DUBAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0082
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHDIR/IRAN RPO DUBAI 0075
RHEFDHP/DIA DHP-1 WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0077

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000017

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/28/2017
TAGS: IR PGOV PHUM
SUBJECT: IRANIAN WOMEN TAKE UP BANNER OF REFORM

REF: 2006 IRAN RPO DUBAI 0009

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence Office, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(SBU) Summary: Iranian women's rights activists are emerging as the country's most assertive dissident force, eclipsing most other key pro-reform constituencies in Iran. During the Khatami presidency from 1997-2005, students and journalists constituted the leading edge of reform and political activism. With some exceptions, women adopted quieter tactics during that time to promote change in the Iranian legal system's treatment of women.

Since early 2006, however, women's rights activists in Iran have become increasingly vocal and visible, resisting the new administration's efforts to stymie the voice of civil society. These women have a clear and specific agenda -- legal reform to end laws that they consider discriminatory to women. Their efforts are now at the forefront of the reform movement in Iran, and they are bearing the brunt of the Iranian government's efforts to contain civil society. End summary.

Recent history of women's rights in Iran

2.(SBU) The fate of the women's rights movement in Iran is currently at the forefront of civil society in Iran in general. Under President Khatami, the women's movement scored an important victory. Following months of efforts, the reformist sixth Majles approved the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on June 23, 2003. However, the conservative Guardian Council vetoed adoption of CEDAW, saying it violated both Iranian and Islamic law.

3.(SBU) Since August 2005, the Ahmadinejad administration, which fears that an active civil society will produce a "velvet revolution" in Iran, has cracked down strongly on intellectuals, scholars, journalists, and non-governmental organizations inside the country. The crackdown gained steam with the April 2006 arrest of prominent intellectual Ramin Jahanbegloo, following his travel to the US and other countries for academic conferences and research.

4.(SBU) The government's efforts, however, have not stifled activism on the part of women's groups, although these activists have also suffered harassment, travel bans, and arrests as a result. Though many activists continued their efforts, relatively little was heard about the women's rights movement in Iran until early 2006. On March 8, 2006, security forces disrupted a rally to celebrate International Women's Day in

Tehran. They used force to disperse demonstrators, bringing greater international attention to the women's rights movement in Iran. Women's rights activists later organized a demonstration on June 12 in Tehran to call for reform of the Iranian legal system. Again, security forces forcibly disrupted the June demonstration and arrested several demonstrators. The women were protesting laws that state, for example, that a woman's life and her court testimony are worth half that of a man's, and that married women cannot obtain divorces, custody of their children after the age of seven, or travel outside the country without their husband's permission. Iranian law also states that death by stoning is the appropriate punishment for adultery.

5.(SBU) Women's groups are also increasingly using petitions as a method to protest and draw international attention to key women's rights issues. In late 2006, women's groups in Iran began a petition calling for an end to the practice of stoning, and other petitions protesting specific cases of stoning convictions were also circulated. A petition campaign entitled "One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws" was also launched in August 2006. Campaigners intend to go door-to-door to obtain the referenced million signatures for their petition. One benefit of this tactic, campaigners say, is that it will increase awareness among Iranian women about their legal status, even if some women do not sign the petition.

The women's rights movement in 2007

6.(C) Five women's rights activists -- Nooshin Ahmadi Khorasani, Parvin Ardalani, Shahla Entesari, Sussan Tahmasebi (who also holds US citizenship), and Fariba Davoodi Mohajer -- were later put on trial for organizing the June 2006 demonstration. The five women are also organizing members of the "One Million Signatures" campaign. They are charged with "acting against national security." (Note: Fariba Davoodi Mohajer was in the US at the time of the court date and thus escaped arrest. Endnote) Their trial date was set for March 4, 2007, only four days,

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before International Women's Day. Many observers speculated that the trial date was chosen deliberately to deter another rally. Women's groups organized a rally in 2007 nonetheless, which was mired with similar violence against demonstrators.

7.(U) On the day of the trial, women's groups held a demonstration outside of the courthouse, to show solidarity with the women on trial. Police used force to disperse demonstrators and arrested several of them. When the women being tried protested the treatment of the demonstrators, they too were arrested. Khorasani, Ardalani, Entesari, and Tahmasebi were taken to Evin prison, along with 29 arrested demonstrators; a total of 33 arrested. Domestic press reports indicate that 30 of the women were detained for less than a week, and then released. Authorities held three prominent activists -- Shadi Sadr, Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, and Jila Baniyaghoub -- until the final days of the Iranian year 1385, which ended March 21, 2007.

Travel bans and NGO closures

8. (SBU) On January 26, 15 women journalists were detained by authorities as they attempted to travel to India for an educational workshop on journalism. Three of the women were taken to Evin prison and held for 24 hours, and are reported to be facing trial in April on charges of "acting against national security" by planning to participate in the journalism workshop.

The women were reportedly interrogated about their possible connections with organizations that have received foreign funding.

9. (U) In late March, three prominent NGOs -- Iran CSOs Training and Research Center (ICTRC), Raahi Legal Center, and Non-Governmental Organizations Training Center -- were shut down by the government. The latter two NGOs were founded by Shadi

Sadr and Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh respectively, two of the activists arrested March 4.

10.(C) Comment: The government's paranoia of a velvet revolution orchestrated by the West is part of its motivation for pressuring civil society in Iran, including the women's movement. Another motivation is clashes on religious grounds between the conservative government and the more liberal women's movement, as evidenced by Ahmadinejad's immediate step to reorient the women's affairs office established by Khatami to a family issues office. The government's efforts to silence this movement are also consistent with an overall strategy of increasing "unity and solidarity" among the public (i.e. suppressing dissent) in the face of increasing international pressure over its nuclear program.

11.(C) Comment cont'd: It is also worth noting that in contrast to most other countries in the region, women in Iran are not fighting for rights they have never had. Rather, they are fighting in part to regain rights they enjoyed prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution. It is unclear how significant of a constituency the arrested women represent; while anecdotal reports suggest that dissatisfaction with the Islamic Republic's policies on women's issues is widespread, only a very small percentage of Iranian women have actively engaged in efforts to confront the government. However, even if they represent only a small elite, the women's activists currently under fire in Iran could play a critical role in mobilizing a more assertive reform movement in Iran through their linkages with other reform actors and the broad societal sympathy toward their aims.

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